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Natasha Lobo

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all the ways...

By Natasha Lobo¹

Abstract

'*all the ways...*' was written for a Women's Studies module - 'Identity, Difference and the Body'. This module explored feminist perspectives on the nature/culture divide and the production of sexed, gendered and raced bodies, and surveyed a range of different feminist analytical approaches to the body, including postmodern, phenomenological, Black feminist and postcolonial perspectives. It considered the construction of sex, gender and sexuality through different cultural and social practices which take the body as their principal focus, and examined a variety of case studies such as: body image and norms of femininity; food, dieting and eating disorders; body modification; body adornment. The unit also considered feminist analyses of medical, scientific and technological discourses and practices aimed at the female body, including scientific representations of the body, cyborg bodies, and constructions of disability. My essay is a creative exploration of the female/feminine body, drawing on the style of French feminist thinker Luce Irigaray. The intention of the essay is to incorporate elements of all the material covered in the module, using my own understanding and interpretation... I picked a creative assignment because I wanted to take the opportunity to explore a different aspect of academic writing. It is the first piece of creative work that I have written for many years, and I found the assignment both challenging and very enjoyable.

Keywords: the body, femininity, body image, Irigaray

All the ways in which my body has betrayed me are many.

Or so it would seem.

Double 'X' has sealed my fate. Supposedly.

These female chromosomes have propelled me into a world not of my making, not to my liking. A world in which my devalued female gender is CAST as the second sex, the fair sex, the gentle sex, the weaker sex. Somehow, 'X' plus 'X' equals less than 'X' plus 'Y'.

(X + X) < (X + Y)

BUT. It is not my body that has created this unfathomable equation. It is not I who imposed the Rules the Codes the Cultural Norms the Social Standards. The Invisible 'Truths'.

¹ Natasha Lobo is currently working as a Forensic Mental Health Advocate at a Medium Secure Unit in Hackney, London. Her studies at London Metropolitan University are ongoing.

So ...

All the ways in which the world has betrayed me, a ‘misbegotten man’,² are many. Obvious. Subtle.

Even so...

All the ways in which the female body can be re-thought are many. Multiple. Multi-layered...

‘TRUTHS’ need to be questioned. ‘Essential’ characteristics need to be dismantled. (*Essential to who?*) Dig a little deeper and you might find that the so-called ‘basics’ are only essential for the perpetuation of the Big Lie that is ‘human nature’.³ (And many ‘truths’ are not even *slightly* true at all). A ‘truth’ is a shape-shifting thing. Nothing is set in stone. Except stone itself. Are we, our bodies, our genders, unalterable like stone? Are we so FIXED, so bound to an archaic binary that dictates to us, as women, how to be women? The *man*-made Law Of Femininity instructs us on how we should live, how we should be, who we should be, who we should be with ... *Should* should not be. Surely *should* is not natural. Is it??

What *is* natural? Certainly not us. Not man. Not woman. We are metaphorical robots, following orders and playing roles. *Walk like a man. Giggle like a girl. That’s a job for a man. A woman’s place is in the home. Boys love cars. Girls love dolls. That’s so unmanly. That’s so unladylike. BEHAVE like a gentleman. ACT like a lady.* Watch and learn. Observe, assimilate, integrate, perform, conform, repeat, recite, repeat, perform, repeat repeat repeat.⁴ We name, we label and then we pass it on. We impose gender upon our bodies through LANGUAGE - from a baby’s first cry (“It’s girl!! Isn’t she pretty?!”), until our last dying breath (“He was a good father. He provided for his family”). The *illusions* of stability and coherence become a lived reality, until the well-rehearsed routine feels ‘natural’. Thus, through time, the historical becomes the biological.

When you say ‘women *ought*’, ‘women *can’t*’, what you mean is women MUST. You must do this and that, be this and that, in order for the (patriarchal) world to keep turning, to stop spinning off its’ axis. Oh, what a tangled web we have weaved...

Society normalises the *concept* of two polarised genders. Society normalises you. Abnormalises you. Me. Us. ... Society: a disembodied entity, often held responsible for the good/bad/happy/sad/mad state of the collective people. We discuss the ills of society,

² Weitz, Rose (1998) ‘A History of Women’s Bodies’ in *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, Behaviour*, Oxford University Press.

³ Lorber, Judith (1998) ‘Believing Is Seeing: Biology as Ideology’ in Weitz, R. (ed) *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, Behaviour*, Oxford University Press.

⁴ Butler, Judith (1999) ‘Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire’ in *Gender Trouble*, Routledge.

as if 'society' were a disengaged, separate unit. Not a breathing mass made up of many beings, many BODIES.

People make culture. People fake culture. Break it. Unmake it. Forsake it...

Science naturalises masculinity and femininity, whilst generally avoiding discussion of those who do not fit into the acceptable equation. Those who are categorized as Other, are ostracised in relation to the norm. Wherever you go, whatever you do, whoever you do, *it's still all about The Norm*. We shall never ascend from Binary Hell unless we re-write re-think re-claim The Body. It is not the conventional that interests me, it is the unconventional - the unnatural, the outsiders, the Sister Outsiders.⁵

If your name's not *Normal*, you're not coming in. Hop on board the bus if you are youthful, attractive, affluent and WHITE. Are you on the bus? Or are you off the bus? ⁶

Fear Old Age
Dread decline
The Broken Body shall not be mine...

The Redundant Body, the Rejected Body has no place in this world. Let it sit on the outside. But, look closer - different experiences are valuable. You have mastered the Art of Detachment... now consider Transcendence and Acceptance⁷. The *exceptions* to the rule have much to teach us, a great deal to show us. Breach your feminine boundaries. Transgress your bodily borders. Disrupt. Subvert. Defy the illogical logic.

Resist being *This* or *That*. One or the Other. What if I'm Another - this *and* that and *more besides*?

Neither one nor the other? Invisible intersex bodies; corrected to a single gender. You CANNOT be both. (But you are). The ultimate proof that gender is an elaborate DOING. *Gender is our undoing*. There is no 'true' female sex. No unadulterated male sex. No purity of gender...

... No purity of origin⁸. You know who you are, because you know who you are not?? Imagine the body in other ways – mutate, metamorphose.⁹. In a sense, innocence does not exist... We are already experiencing colossal shifts in our embodied lives. There is PROMISE in the struggle against perfect communication.

⁵ Lorde, Audre (1984) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press.

⁶ Wolfe, Tom (1989) *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Black Swan

⁷ Wendell, Susan (1999) 'Feminism, Disability and Transcendence of the Body', in Price, Janet and M. Shildrick (eds) *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, Routledge

⁸ Haraway, Donna (1992) 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, Routledge.

⁹ Ibid.

Where am I when my body is walking, mouth talking, mobile phone clamped to my ear? Where is my mind? Where is my mind? Way out in the virtual waters, see it swimming...

All the ways in which your body has been deemed problematic are many...

Multiple. Manifold. Multiplex. Complex body, simple mind. Fullness of body, emptiness of mind. Unstable unpredictable LEAKY female body, steeped in hysteria, reeking of nature. Plural and polymorphous of character.¹⁰ ... It moves, it changes, it swells, it flows, it bleeds. Take this, all of you and *use* it. This is my LUMINOUS body, my full-bodied blood - it shall be given up for you...

Excuse me, but can I be myself for a while? I would like my body back.

JUST WHOSE BODY IS IT ANYWAY?!

Ground control to those who have lost their bodies to the reflection of male desire... Climb out of your culture and step into your own skin. Too loose? Too tight? It will fit in time. OPEN yourself.

Living is easy with eyes closed,¹¹ ears blocked, mouth shut. *Is it not?*

But you are not dead...

Listen to your heartbeat – they do not own it. It's YOURS. Open your eyes, look at your body. Appreciate the value of your body. It is not ONE little penis that you possess – you have multiple sex organs on every inch of your body, you can feel pleasure anywhere everywhere.¹² Omnipresent. OMNIPOTENT. Your pleasure, your power does not lie in ONENess. Not *merely* one.

As a courageous woman, you do not have 'balls'; your strength does not lie in the most VULNERABLE part of the male body. Your indomitable spirit is derived from *within* you.

It is not a penis that you lack. *Words* are what you need.¹³ Change your actions, your language. Speak to me in a different tongue. Speak as a Woman. Intervene *as a woman*.¹⁴ Disrupt their talk. Not equal but different.¹⁵ Not *indifferent*. Not insignificant.

¹⁰ Whitford, Margaret (1991) 'Feminism and Utopia' in *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, Routledge.

¹¹ The Beatles, (1967) 'Strawberry Fields Forever', Parlophone.

¹² Irigaray, Luce (1985) 'When Our Lips Speak Together' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Cornell University Press

¹³ Irigaray, Luce (1985) 'When Our Lips Speak Together' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Cornell University Press

Revel in your excess. (The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom – does it not?)¹⁶ Take comfort in your fluency. Unleash your FLUIDITY. Reach deep down inside - your eroticism is flowing multiple, unlocatable, non-identical.¹⁷

Disrupt their senses; challenge their vision - *their blinkered 'Enlightened' vision*.¹⁸ Break down their beliefs ...

The Beliefs the Religions the Faiths that castigate you. The Creeds that castrate you. The doctrines that deem your beautiful body SINFUL. Because God told us, because the Holy Book tells us. Because they profess to know. But, they only *believe*. (Or would have us believe). They do not *really* know...

Where is the *daughter* of God? Where are the female prophets? Where is Pope Joan-Paula the 1st? When will the Dalai Lama be reincarnated in the body of a *female* child? (Did that *damned* Eve ruin it for us all?)

Bite the APPLE and spit it out. In their holy faces.

Make pie with the apple. Do not aim low. Have high-in-the-sky-apple-pie-hopes.

Devour the apple. ENJOY. Taste bliss. *There is no wickedness in your delight*.¹⁹

A juicy red apple is nice. BUT ... not every apple is red.

Upset the apple cart.

All the ways in which the Cult of Body Image has betrayed our bodies are too many...

Your ample female flesh is (embarrassingly) out of control. Take ACTION to correct this (shameful) state of body, this unregulated state of mind. Tone it up, smooth it out, tie it down. Be soft be silky be supple.²⁰ Constrain your desires, restrict your consumption, curb your passion. POLICE yourself.²¹ Guard against the slack enemy, the loose enemy, the threat of excess, the menace of surplus. Be vigilant. Always. *Forever*.

¹⁴ Whitford, Margaret (1991) 'Feminism and Utopia' in *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, Routledge.

¹⁵ Whitford, Margaret (ed) (1991) 'Equal or Different?' in *The Irigaray Reader*, Blackwell.

¹⁶ Blake, William (1793) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Penguin.

¹⁷ Irigaray, Luce (1985) 'When Our Lips Speak Together' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Cornell University Press

¹⁸ Irigaray, Luce (1985) *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Cornell University Press.

¹⁹ Irigaray, Luce (1985) 'When Our Lips Speak Together' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Cornell University Press

²⁰ Bartky, Sandra Lee (1998) 'Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power', in *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, Behaviour*, Oxford University Press.

²¹ Bordo, Susan (1990) *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, University of California Press

For femininity is constructed and re-constructed as an *impossible* ideal. (But shhhhh! Don't tell. Focus on the body. Not the mind. The body. Not the mind. Focus your mind on your body. Your BODY).

These are the things that you put up with. These are the things that we put up with.

Ascetically, the FLESH needs to suffer in order for *his* SOUL to reach a higher level. Does it not?

Aesthetically, the flesh needs to suffer in order for *her* BODY to reach a perfect IDEAL. Does it not?

Too thin too fat too small too tall too flabby too scrawny... Lead me to a woman who LOVES her body, and I shall show you a myriad that do not.

Demons named 'Anorexia' invade bodies unable to resist the tyranny of the Slender Body. Demons named 'Control' saturate minds that are hazed dazed lost and afraid... Socially produced or genetically pre-destined? Nature or nurture? (Binaries reign supreme). It is a sign of the times. *This mess we're in.*

Traumatic. Tragic. But at least she's THIN. Eternally youthful beautiful fertile POWERFUL.²² The marks of time character wisdom LIFE... are not wanted here.²³

Mutilate me, to titillate you.

Full lips, big tits, shapely hips. (Heavy heart?)

Sculpt your body, sculpt your life. Externalise the internal. You now have the tools to compete with the Big Boys. Welcome to the backslapping, backstabbing business world of men. Come on! Keep on keep up in this male domain. (A girl's gotta do what a boy's gotta do!)

All the ways in which your body may not be *your* body are many...

Let us prioritise the INNOCENT body, the SACRED foetal body. Dismiss the (possibly) scared female body. It's ok, this independent body can be told what to do *when one becomes two*.²⁴ The pregnancy prescription was written many moons ago. She

²² Morgan, Kathryn (1998) 'Women and the Knife', in Weitz, R. (ed) *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, Behaviour*, Oxford University Press.

²³ Bartky, Sandra Lee (1998) 'Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power', in Weitz, R. (ed) *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, Behaviour*, Oxford University Press.

²⁴ Irigaray, Luce (1985) 'This Sex Which Is Not One', in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Cornell University Press

comes complete with imposed signs and meanings inscribed on her body – just follow the instructions. She will comply. Won't she? *She won't?! (Selfish, sinful woman).*²⁵

The fully formed body, fully fucked-up soul.

VERSUS

The flawless foetus.

The pregnant body was once a foetal body. Then it upped and grew ... And what of the grown-up female foetus (a.k.a Woman)? ...Is the pregnant body simply a container for the foetus? A vessel for his Seed? ... Well whatever nevermind - we say that *you must respect the rights of the foetus*.

Because we are Pro-Life. (Disclaimer: just not YOUR life.)

(Cannot procreate? You are incomplete. Obsolete).

All the ways in which your body can deviate are many ...

“Is IT a boy or a girl?” Sir? Er.. Madam? *Eyes linger, pointed finger.* Either. Neither. Both. ... Actually, in this instance, *it* is a SHE. Not a non-he. I am a SomeBODY. (And I celebrate my androgyny). ... You may be an EYE. But I am an I. So adjust your Gaze, change *your* ways. (Because *I* am not changing mine.)

I am a SHE who desires a HER. And the partaking of graphic Sapphic sex is for *my* pleasure. Not yours.

(Sorry folks, *I'm not like other girls, you can't straighten my curls.*)²⁶

Burn the Witch. Silence the Feminist Bitch. Doubly Deviant. (Twice as nice). *I bat for the other team.* Well, mostly. (Like I said, nothing is set in stone. Except stone itself.)

Strip me whip me chain me inflict pain on me. *The pleasure is mine.*

Homosexual. Heterosexual. Bisexual. Be sexual.

Or not.

²⁵ Pollit, Katha (1998) 'Fetal Rights' in Weitz, R. (ed) *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, Behaviour*, Oxford University Press.

²⁶ Harvey, P.J (2004) *'Who The Fuck?!'* Island Records.

*whatever good there is to get
get it and feel good*²⁷

All the ways in which my body has delighted me are many.

But that is an-Other story altogether...

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²⁷ Shange Ntozake (1989) 'get it & feel good' in Healy, M. (ed) *Fire the Sun: An Anthology of Poems*, Longman.